

Until the End

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Summary: Itachi realizes he needs help if he is to survive until it's time to face Sasuke. He goes in search of his former ANBU teammate, Akane Nara, the only medic-nin he knows and who may be willing to help him. But will she help him after he left her behind and burdened her with the truth about the Uchiha massacre? Sequel to "Hero". Can be read as a standalone, too.

## 1. Konoha Trail

**\*\*Chapter 1 - Konoha Trail\*\***

"Oi."

Kisame waited for an answer which did not come. For a while, he followed his partner quietly through the canopy, leaping from branch to branch close behind Itachi. The latter showed no interest in stopping, even when Kisame called him a second time.

"Oi, Itachi-san!"

But the Uchiha was clearly in no mood to explain why they were heading at full speed towards Konoha. Itachi had been ignoring his questions regarding this ever since they had left the hideout. It was unlike like him to drag Kisame along without an explanation.

"Itachi-san, we've been at it for three days now! What are we going to Konoha for?"

Itachi stopped on a branch. Kisame halted beside him, looking in the same direction. He could see the outline of Konoha's walls through the foliage. He looked at his partner, quietly demanding the answer to his question.

"I'm looking for someone," Itachi said after a few moments of deliberation, not taking his eyes off the wall in the distance. "One of my former ANBU teammates."

Kisame made a long face. Itachi had never talked about his ANBU days. Come to think of it, Itachi rarely talked about his past. Why would he go looking for one of his old teammates now, all of the sudden? His tongue itched to ask more questions, but he refrained himself. It seemed he would find out soon enough anyway.

"Let's wait for the dark."

"Mm," Kisame approved.

The sound of cicadas surrounded them in the light of the fiery sunset filtering through the foliage. Itachi closed his eyes, allowing himself a moment of peace in the familiar sound.

"Itachi-san... does this have anything to do with your little brother?"

Itachi opened his eyes.

"No."

"Hmmm," Kisame cooed. "It's strange that we haven't run into any patrols this close to the village. You'd think that after what happened years ago with Orochimaru..."

He chuckled as he finished his sentence and looked up at the patches of sky. Clouds brimmed with pink floated against the golden canvas. The light made the trees seem on fire.

"It's quiet."

Kisame's voice sounded like low thunder. Itachi did not flinch. His eyes were closed and the muscles on his face relaxed, as if he were meditating. The sounds of the forest around them was like a lullaby to him - one he had not heard in a very long time. No, it was not quiet. The forest was never quiet.

Sometime after dusk settled over the forest, crickets engaged in their usual background humming, rivaling the cicadas. An owl hooted nearby, calling for another. Itachi stood up from where he had been sitting, on the branch of an oak tree. His sharingan shone in the dark, staring at Konoha's wall, although Kisame could no longer see it in the dark. He looked at Itachi, rearing to go and finish this odd business. Finally, his partner leapt forward. Kisame followed, casing a faint rustle among the leaves.

Moving through the dark, with a sweet summer breeze blowing against his face, Kisame felt free and at ease. He grinned as he pressed against a branch for another jump, moving with renewed strength and enthusiasm at the thought of this trip being almost over. He was hoping for his efforts to be well worth it. What could be so important about someone for Itachi to go through all the trouble to find them?

"We're taking the rooftops," Itachi said after they got past the wall unseen.

Kisame smirked. It was not often that he saw his partner so fired up about something, especially given how that something was actually someone. He found it intriguing, even more so since it involved his past. Itachi always seemed reluctant to pursue shadows from his past.

The sounds coming from the streets below barely reached them as they passed. They were two shadows moving soundlessly in the darkness of a moonless night. Kisame noticed they were leaving behind the hustle, heading toward the quieter outskirts of Konoha. He found himself questioning Itachi's motives once more. From what little knowledge of Konoha he had, it seemed they were going straight toward the Uchiha grounds.

"Itachi-san..."

"We're here."

Itachi jumped off the edge of a roof and landed in a narrow street, in front of a large house. By the looks of it, no one was at home. Neither of them could sense any chakra signature on the grounds, but Itachi thought he could feel something. Residual chakra, but nonetheless something. The house was not deserted - someone still lived there.

As the two Akatsuki gazed at the building, voices echoed further down the road. A woman and a man were coming their way at a leisurely pace, but Itachi did not recognize their voices, so he and Kisame stepped into the shadows to avoid detection. The voices grew louder as the strangers approached. Itachi's eyes narrowed when the man and woman stepped into the light of a nearby street lamp. The man seemed to be slightly inebriated. The woman, Itachi did not recognize. However, the man's face was as familiar to him as one seen in an old dream. He stepped out of the shadows, into the light.

"Nara Enki-san," he said, causing the man to stop. It took no more than a few moments for Enki to recognize a wanted S-rank criminal, even in his state. He pushed the woman behind him, but she appeared to be a Yamanaka kunoichi and she stepped right back beside him. As Kisame joined his partner, Enki pulled out a kunai, though his hand was shaking â€" a detail too minute for the eye, but not for the sharingan.

"Uchiha. What are you doing here?" Enki asked.

"I'm looking for Akane-san."

Enki seemed surprised. He nudged his companion and she seemed to get the message, because she glared at them and jumped on the roof of a nearby house. Running to get help, no doubt, Kisame thought. He made a move to go after her, but Itachi held out a hand to stop him. This would not take long enough for help to arrive.

"What business does scum like you have with my sister?" Enki said, trying to look defiant.

Itachi blinked once to clear the fog from his eyes and made a few steps forward, while the man made an equal number of steps backward. Kisame watched, feeling slightly amused, and though his palms were

itching to grab Samehada, he decided to leave matters to Itachi, out of respect.

"I don't wish to hurt you," Itachi told the Konoha shinobi, "but either you talk, or I will hurt you and you will talk."

Enki's entire body was tense now and shaking. His eyes were watching, alert for Itachi's each and every move. He remained silent for a while. Kisame wanted to think he was considering Itachi's offer, but he may have just been stalling. After moments of deliberation, the shinobi spoke in an uncertain tone, as if fearing his words would displease Itachi.

"Nara Akane is a traitor to this village. She left Konoha the day after you massacred your clan. The last time I heard anything about her, she had been spotted in the Land of Snow, but that was over a year ago. She could be anywhere."

Itachi vacillated. Kisame watched Adam's apple bobbing in Enki's throat and grabbed the handle of his sword. His partner would at least allow him a brawl. Itachi, however, seemed to finally decide the Konoha shinobi was telling the truth, because he turned around, ready to go.

"Kisame."

Kisame snorted, but swung Samehada and let it rest on his shoulder. "Hai," he said.

"We're going."

Enki's hands moved to form a seal, but hardly had they come together when Itachi turned around and knocked him out cold with the Tsukuyomi. Kisame grinned and followed his partner away from the scene and across Konoha. It occurred to him that they were headed north.

"I take it we're going to Yukigakure now, Itachi-san?"

Itachi did not reply.

## 2. The Lost ANBU

### \*\*Chapter 2 - The Lost ANBU\*\*

The icy wind made Itachi's cheeks numb, even though they had stopped running a while ago. The snow covered everything â€" an every-growing blanket under the flurry of snowflakes coming down from the sky without respite. He had given up trying to keep his straw hat on with the wind gusting from every direction like a whip. Snow clung to his robe and his hair. He blinked often to melt the snowflakes caught in his lashes, impairing his vision. Not that it was any help in this white hell. His body felt numb from the cold and sore from the long journey. The only consolation was knowing it would not be much longer until they reached Yukigakure.

The Village Hidden in Snow had no military power of its own, but due to its remote location, it had proven to be the ideal location for mercenaries and missing-nin, a place where one would find hiring a

decent assassin rather cheap. Cheaper than the Akatsuki, anyway. Itachi wondered if his former ANBU teammate had chosen this path, though she had not been much of a fighter by ANBU standards. Other skills had earned her place within Team Ro, one of which he needed desperately. Finding her here would not be a difficult task. Yukigakure was the smallest of all shinobi villages, with only a few scattered buildings dotting the endless white surroundings.

"Itachi-san, let's stop for something hot to drink before we start looking for your friend."

Itachi nodded. Something warm to bring some life back into his limbs was exactly what he needed. Beyond the village gates, however, the offer proved to be not so appealing. The poor state of the village reflected in every aspect, from the tiny, ramshackle buildings almost bending under the weight of the snow to the motley of ill-fitting clothes its residents wore. Itachi and Kisame soon realized that aside from the crowded, basement taverns, there were few decent places to warm up in. The people passing by threw hostile glances at the two Akatsuki standing in the middle of the snow-covered road. The storm was getting worse and the wind was slowly gaining in speed and strength. The street lamps on the side of the road glowed like dying fireflies.

"A teahouse."

Itachi's raspy voice caught Kisame's attention immediately. They were the first words he had said in days. He turned his head and barely saw the sign hanging over what seemed like the gate leading into a teahouse's courtyard. Itachi headed that way against the wind and Kisame had no choice but to follow. Past the gate, they stepped into a small garden. Its surrounding stone walls offered some shelter. The water in a fountain to the left had frozen solid, cracking the stone. To their right, an ice sculpture in the shape of a deer rose from the snow. A small crease appeared between Itachi's brows, only to disappear a moment after.

A servant girl opened the sliding panel door for them to enter. Kisame grinned, showing his jagged teeth as he looked down at the girl kneeling by the door with her head bowed respectfully. "Now this is my kind of place," he said.

Itachi pretended not to hear. The teahouse was modest at best, with squeaky floors and an unpleasant scent he could not identify, but the warmth made his flesh tingle ever so slightly. The servant girl wanted to take their soaked cloaks, but Kisame snarled and she stepped back with a deep bow. She led them down a corridor which smelled like roasted tea leaves. At the end of it, they entered a room with a low table in the middle and sat on the cushions arranged around it, facing each other. Kisame told the girl to bring them warm sakã and food.

They sat there for what felt like hours until the girl finally came back with drink and food, pale and avoiding Kisame's stare. The Kiri-nin poured for both himself and Itachi, then poured his own cup down his throat in a moment. He wiped his mouth clean with the back of his hand and let out a deep, rumbling burp. He filled his cup again.

"Where should we begin looking for your missing ANBU, eh, Itachi-san? And if she's not here, are we going to go on another wild goose chase?"

Just as he finished his sentence, the panel door slid open, allowing a kimono-clad woman to enter. Kisame turned his head, his mouth full and half a rice cake in his hand. The kimono rustled as she moved, like a forest in the breeze. Itachi recognized the sound of pure silk and frowned. Pure silk in a second-hand teahouse in a third-hand shinobi village? His eyes went up over the dark indigo design, where golden fireflies swirled over a grey mountain lake. Dark leaves formed ripples on the surface of the water. It had been skillfully dyed.

The woman's dark hair was loose on her shoulders, reaching all the way past her obi. Half of it was pinned at the top of her head with two senbon. Kisame grinned all the way up to his ears, but it was not until she spoke that Itachi recognized her.

"Uchiha Itachi-san."

His sharingan stared into the blue-grey eyes gazing back at him, as calm and cold as the lake on the kimono. Kisame studied his partner's attempt at a facial expression in wonder. He then looked at the woman standing in front of them, with her hands folded before her demurely. There was nothing demure about the rest of her, though. The perfect oval of her face was like an ANBU mask with crimson lips.

"Nara Akane-san," Itachi said, much to Kisame's surprise.

"Itachi-san, don't tell me this is your lost ANBU."

The woman turned her head toward him, acknowledging him with a simple nod. "Hoshigaki Kisame-san. It is an honor to meet a former swordsman of the mist."

As she seemingly glided towards their table, Itachi looked down into his cup. Six years had passed since he had last seen her. She had not looked much like a woman then and his eyesight had not been so bad. No wonder he had not recognized her just now. He wondered how much Sasuke had changed since he had last seen him.

"What could possibly bring two Akatsuki members this far north?" she asked, filling Kisame's cup. "There are no jinchuuriki here."

It seemed their reputation had preceded them to Yukigakure, despite the fact that Akatsuki had yet to take any steps in that direction. Kisame brushed the matter aside with a wave of his hand.

"We've actually been looking for you, kunoichi."

She turned her gaze toward Itachi. "Well, you've found me," she said, looking into his sharingan.

Kisame smirked, knowing she had made a mistake. He tapped his fingers against the table, waiting for her collapse under the power Itachi's genjutsu. This silent exchange of looks was all too familiar to the mist shinobi, yet as more and more seconds passed and she did not start screaming in terror it became obvious to him that Itachi was

not attacking. It struck Kisame as odd to think that his partner would use this method to have a private conversation with this woman. His curiosity was starting to itch like a healing wound. What was it that Itachi was hiding from him?

The woman's hand rose slowly, her fingers moving to form a release seal. Kisame watched with growing interest. However, her hand wavered and stopped mid-seal. Whatever Itachi was saying to her, it proved effective. The kunoichi placed her hand back in her lap. What a disappointment.

Just when Kisame's patience was starting to run out along with the sakã in the bottle, the woman stirred. Next to him, Itachi grabbed his cup and drank the now lukewarm drink. Kisame waited for a hint of what had transpired between them, but none came. He emptied the bottle sullenly. At least there would be no more running around. With a little luck, they would have a couple of days to themselves before the Leader gave them a mission.

"We'll rest here for the night," Itachi said, standing up. "Tomorrow we head back."

Kisame harrumphed and followed his partner. Outside the room, the servant girl was waiting for them. "Allow me to show you to your room," she said meekly.

"Itachi-san," Kisame said as soon as they were alone, "this ANBU of yoursâ€|"

"She'll be coming with us."

"Eh?" It was out of his mouth before he could stop it. He watched Itachi shrug off his cloak and lay down to sleep and he realized his partner would not say more of his own accord. "This is bound to be cumbersome, even if she is a kunoichi."

"I'll take responsibility for her."

Kisame sighed. Whatever this was about, it was important enough for Itachi to remain adamant about. He decided to trust the Uchiha on this one and let it goâ€| for now.

### 3. Under the Red Sky

**\*\*Chapter 3 - Under the Red Sky \*\***

"\_Forgive me, Akaneâ€| and thank you."\_

\_Itachi remembered the last words he had said to her, six years ago, on \_that\_ night. Akane likely did not. He had already knocked the air out of her and made her unconscious. Strange how the memory of that moment had come back to him now. He pushed it at the back of his mind. He had other things to discuss with her. \_

\_They were standing face to face, with the red sky of his genjutsu illusion above them. Hours could pass here and seem like mere moments in the real world. He took his time and regarded her silently, allowing himself to take in just how much she had changed. She had grown into a fine woman, he had never doubted that she wouldâ€| but

she felt weaker. He frowned slightly. This was not what he had been expecting, not what he had been hoping for. He hated to think that he might have come all this way for nothing. \_

"\_Why are you here, Itachi?" she asked, shifting her position to indicate that his staring made her uncomfortable. Her question unexpectedly miffed him. 'Why are you not in Konoha?' he wanted to ask in return, but he stopped himself before giving voice to that thought. It did not matter. \_

"\_I need your help," he said. "Your healing, to be more precise."\_

\_Akane showed no surprise. "I can't do anything about your eyes. No one can," she said, and her hand moved up to form the release seal.\_

\_How she could possibly have known about how the Mangekyou affected his vision was beyond him. Nonetheless, her assumption was incorrect. Itachi shook his head. "My eyes are not the problem."\_

\_Akane stopped mid-seal, her interest piqued. "Then?" \_

\_Itachi found himself hesitating. He had not opened up to anyone in years. His throat felt dry all of the sudden and his chest tightened uncomfortably. He had mulled over this matter for weeks now, he had come to a resolve. None of that seemed to matter now, as this unexplainable dread settled in the pit of his stomach. He gritted his teeth in frustration. He had come this far. He had no choice.\_

"\_I am sick," he said, the words barely making their way out. Before he could change his mind, he went on: "This is not something that can be cured. I need you to prolong my life for as long as possible. Can you do that?"\_

\_Akane stared at him, not bothering to conceal her surprise this time. Her hand dropped. For a moment he wondered whether she understood what he was implying, but then he saw her look away. He saw the pain in her eyesâ€| the pity. He gritted his teeth at that â€ he neither needed nor wanted her pity. \_

"\_I need you to come with me and keep me alive for as long as you can," Itachi added. \_

"\_You mean until Sasuke kills you." It was a statement, he noticed, not a question. The ghost of a smile curled Itachi's lips. He had forgotten what it was like for someone to understand, and understand she did. Whatever doubts he had had upon seeing her again after all those years were overshadowed by this bittersweet feeling.\_

"\_Until Sasuke kills me," he repeated. \_

\_He had no right to ask this of her, that much he knew. He realized now that perhaps it had been too much to hope that she would help him. If that were the case, Itachi would not know who else to turn to. Akane now held all of his hopes and dreams in the palm of her hand and did not even know it, he thought. \_

"\_Will you help me?" he asked.\_



Itachi thought about their conversation in his genjutsu as he sat by the fire. He glanced at Akane's sleeping form huddled in a sleeping bag to his left, then at his partner, who snored deeply as he rested in a sitting position, with his back against a tree. Kisame had not asked any more questions, but Itachi was certain they were on his mind. He would have to deal with him sooner or later. Kisame did not have to know he was dying. He could tell him he was going blind, which was also true. Whatever happened, this would remain between him and Akane.

They had been travelling south for a couple of days and were still a day away from the nearest Akatsuki hideout. Itachi was hoping for a brief respite there and, more than that, for a little privacy. He could have had Akane pretend to be healing his eyes, but it still felt uncomfortable to do it around Kisame. She had not had a chance to take a look at him and assess the damage in his body. Hopefully it was not already too late.

Kisame opened his eyes.

"Itachi-san?"

"I know."

A kunai slipped into Itachi's hand. He looked up, sharingan blazing. The shinobi was alone – most likely a scout. There were others nearby, no doubt, yet the scout seemed reluctant to attack. He had probably recognized the Akatsuki attire and decided losing his life was not worth it. Itachi decided to make it easier for him.

"We're leaving," he told Kisame. He had no desire to engage in a pointless skirmish and besides, it was almost time for them to move out anyway.

Akane stirred, roused by their voices, rubbed her eyes and got up. She rolled her sleeping bag as Kisame put out the fire with a water blast. Darkness fell upon them. Itachi remembered someone once telling him that the night was always darkest just before dawn. Had it been Shisui? He wondered about that, as it did not make much sense to him.

It only took a couple of minutes for them to move out. The scout did not pursue. As the three of them jumped from branch to branch, Kisame moved closer to Itachi while Akane remained a couple of jumps behind.

"Itachi-san, what do we do about her if we run into trouble? She seems rusty. Hard to believe she was an ANBU."

"She can take care of herself."

"Well, I suppose you don't need her in one piece, just – moderately unharmed."

Itachi did not reply. Kisame fell behind and flashed his fanged teeth in a grin at Akane, who merely threw him a sideways glance and darted off to catch up with Itachi. The forest flashed past them in a daze, leaves swirling and rustling around them until, after what seemed like hours of running, they saw the blushing sky of dawn peeking through the foliage.

Four shinobi were waiting for them in the clearing at the edge of the forest. One look at their forehead protectors identified them as being Takigakure shinobi, probably patrolling the border of their country. Unlike the scout who had decided not to take his chances against them earlier, these ninja stood in their way, kunai in hand. Kisame stepped forward with a malicious grin on his face, swinging Samehada off his shoulder to the ground.

"Finally some action," he said.

"Don't take too long," Itachi told him.

As Kisame stepped into battle, Akane stood by Itachi's side, watching. She had left her silk kimonos behind, in Yukigakure, and had instead donned an attire more appropriate for a shinobi, consisting of a short, sleeveless, black kimono tied with a white sash. She wore no forehead protector. Her long hair was loosely tied midlength. The old ANBU tattoo stood out against the pale skin of her upper arm. Itachi thought of his own tattoo.

"I don't think your partner likes me very much," Akane said.

"It's nothing personal."

One of the four shinobi battling Kisame broke off from the group and started running towards them instead, throwing a barrage of kunai at them. Itachi deflected them all as Akane formed a seal.

"Kagemane no Jutsu!"

The instant he was immobilized by her shadow imitation technique, Itachi trapped his mind in a genjutsu. Akane released the shinobi, as he probably would not be escaping the illusion very soon.

Rusty, but not defenseless, Itachi thought as he looked at her. What truly struck him as odd was that they had worked in near-perfect synchronization. Sure, teamwork was a vital part of any ANBU squad, but they had not been a team for years. It appeared they still knew each other well enough to anticipate each other's basic moves.

Kisame had already finished off two of the remaining shinobi. One swing of the Samehada and the last of them fell to the ground, drained of his chakra. The mist shinobi returned to Itachi.

"That wasn't very entertaining," he said, strapping Samehada to his back.

"Let's go," Itachi said.

The long journey was taking its toll on him, making him feel worse. He was looking forward to a few days of rest at the Akatsuki hideout nearby. At least if the Leader did not see it fit to assign them a mission.

#### 4. Planning Ahead

**\*\*Chapter 4 - Planning Ahead\*\***

"Looks like no one's home," Kisame said as he entered the underground hideout after kicking open a rusty metal door.

Itachi looked around, taking in his surroundings. They had not visited this location in a long time and apparently, no one else had either. A fine layer of dust covered the floor and the scarce pieces of furniture, like the low table in the middle of the room. He placed a few logs in the fireplace and blew a fireball, lighting them up instantly.

"More room for us," Kisame said with a grin, resting his monstrous sword against a wall and stretching with a loud groan.

Itachi lit a torch, then motioned for Akane to follow him and led her to a back room. His torch lit the small space in which a single bed had been crammed in along with some shelves. Akane let her backpack drop to the floor. Itachi removed his cloak.

"We're going to have to share."

"I guess it's good I'm not an Akimichi, then," Akane said, looking at the narrow bed. "Lie down. I'm going to take a look at you now."

Itachi complied. Akane leaned over him and placed her hands on his chest. He felt the warmth of her chakra enter his body and instinctively tensed before willing himself to relax. He had grown unused to anyone being so close to him and the chakra surge made it feel even more intrusive. He turned his head and looked at her.

"Well?"

"How about you deactivate your sharingan for a while? You're using up too much chakra."

Itachi reluctantly let the room dissolve into a blur as his eyes faded from crimson to their normal charcoal hue.

"I have no idea how you're still moving around," she said after what seemed like ages. Her chakra grew in intensity. It glowed green around her hands and the pain that had been consuming him for so long started to fade, little by little, until only a dull throb remained, deep within him. "You're human, Itachi. There's only so much I can do. Don't push it."

Itachi started to feel drunk. He realized he had grown so used to the pain that he had forgotten what it was like to be well, to feel nothing. He closed his eyes and relished in this sensation of relief that washed over him, in the feeling of his body being so light.

A small part of him dared to hope he had been wrong. He hoped Akane would tell him that he had overestimated the power of this cancer eating him from the inside, that she could cure him. When the healing power of her chakra faded, however, he realized that would not be the case. The pain was still there, weaker, but present nonetheless. He could almost feel the \_shinigami\_'s breath down his neck, hear its mocking laughter.

"You should rest now," he heard Akane say, then felt the mattress dip under her weight and the warmth of her body next to him.

He filled his lungs with the stale air and let it out in a long sigh.

Her being this close made him tense and uncomfortable. He tried to move, but his limbs felt like boulders â€" cold, heavy and numb. His efforts added to his tiredness. He gave up, tried not to think about it and as soon as he did, Itachi drifted off into the sweet oblivion of a dreamless sleep.

\* \* \*

><p>Kisame raised a brow when Akane entered the common room alone, sometime later.<p>

"Where's Itachi-san?" he asked, a hint of suspicion in his tone.

"Sleeping."

He watched her dig out a ration bar from the provisions they had bought on their way to the hideout and his eyes fell on the tattoo on her arm.

"You don't fight like an ANBU," the mist shinobi said, taking a gulp from the bottle of \_sakã\_ in his hand. "Don't look like one, either. Least of all one whom Itachi-san would befriend."

"How do you know we're friends? Maybe we're just tolerated acquaintances."

Kisame considered her words, then shook his head and took another sip from the bottle.

"Itachi-san wouldn't go through so much trouble to find a 'tolerated acquaintance'. We traveled for days to look for you in Konoha. He even interrogated some wimp to find out where you were."

"\_Enki?\_" Akane wondered, then told Kisame: "I'm a medic-nin and he's worked with me before. He would trust me to help him with his eyes, but that's about as far as his trust goes." The lie had come easily.

"It's precisely because he would trust you to help with his eyes that I think there's more to your history than you say."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. And even if you were right, why would you care? You're just his partner."

"As you once were," Kisame said, revealing his sharp teeth in one of his usual grins. "Unlike other Akatsuki teams, I dare say Itachi-san and I actually get along. Perhaps you and I are more alike than we'd like to admit."

"No offense, Hoshigaki-san, but we are nothing alike."

"We are loyal, neh?"

Akane took a bite from the ration bar. Kisame finished the remainder of his \_sakã\_ in one gulp and slammed the bottle against the table, his eyes fixed on the woman before him. She returned his gaze, her face a stone mask, betraying nothing of what went on inside her head. In that, at least, she acted like a shinobi.

"Why did you leave your village?" Kisame asked after a while.

"You despise me because I am weak. You are not wrong in doing so. I left Konoha because I was weak."

"People don't become missing-nin because they are weak shinobi. Quite the contrary."

"Was I a \_kunoichi\_ when you found me?"

Kisame snorted.

"Looking at a tree and calling it a bird doesn't make it one," he said. "You may have given up on the life of a shinobi, but apparently it hasn't given up on you. You are weak by your own choice â€" that is what I despise."

He was surprised when the woman's lips curled into a smile. Her eyes, however, looked sad. A crack in her mask. Kisame wondered about the chord he had just struck.

"Was Itachi-san like this before?"

Now it was Akane's turn to be surprised. Kisame smirked.

"You know, cold, quiet, mysteriousâ€¦ all those qualities that make women swoon over him. I never understood why."

Akane seemed to think about it for a moment, then said: "No."

Before Kisame could tell her to go on, Itachi showed up. He noticed his partner looked less pale and stood a bit straighter. The dark circles under his eyes had faded. He wondered, with a grin, just what kind of treatment had this \_kunoichi\_ been applying to him back there.

"We have a mission," Itachi said before Kisame had had a chance to inquire.

"Darn it," he said. "There's no rest for the wicked, it seems. Where to?"

"The border with the Land of Fire. We are to intercept some documents for an interested party."

"That's not far," Kisame said with a sigh. "We can make it there in a day if we put our minds to it, \_neh\_, kunoichi? \_I'll go get my stuff."

Akane slipped her backpack on as Kisame trod out of sight. "Perhaps we can make a trip beyond the border after you're done with your mission," she told Itachi. "Hoshigaki-san can deliver the documents."

Itachi quirked a brow, silently demanding a reason.

"You need medicine," she said. "I can find everything I need in my clan's research facility."

Itachi thought about it. He knew the Nara clan had a research facility hidden somewhere in the mountains, but had had no idea they kept medicine there. It was a sound plan, for now. He would go over the details with Akane after the mission was completed.

"Are we to expect any resistance?" Kisame asked as they were heading toward the border later that day.

"The documents are in the possession of a shinobi team from Iwagakure," Itachi said. "They are to give them to a Konoha team. We should intercept them before that happens to avoid unnecessary delays."

"I agree. You Konoha shinobi never know when to back down." He then grumbled something about a man in a green leotard. Itachi thought about Uzumaki Naruto. He would have to take care of that part of his plan soon.

They arrived at the border an hour before sundown. There seemed to be no sign of either shinobi team. Kisame took Samehada off his shoulder and leaned on it.

"Do you think we've missed them, Itachi-san?"

"No."

He counted off the tags. \_One, two, three—| four. \_Akane had spotted them too. Kisame was the last to realize.

"I see. What a nice welcome party," he said. "A barrier \_ninjutsu. \_Heh!" He held out Samehada towards a nearby explosive tag and it sucked the chakra out of it within moments.

"\_Doton: Ganban Kyuu!"\_ (A.N.: Earth Style: Bedrock Coffin)

The earth rumbled underneath their feet. Sections of rock rose from the ground and trapped them within. Akane's Raikiri chirruped and lit in the dark, smashing through the earth wall. The entire structure collapsed. The three escaped unseen in the dust that rose. The Iwagakure shinobi, however, had already surrounded them.

Kisame grinned. At long last, some \_real\_ entertainment. He felt Samehada shiver with pleasure at the feast ahead. The six shinobi attacked simultaneously, three of them ganging up on Kisame, who could not have been more pleased.

Itachi attempted to trap one of his opponents in a genjutsu, but these Iwa shinobi had a stronger mind than most and the man freed himself from the illusion without breaking much of a sweat. He threw kunai at him, but Itachi diverted them with shuriken. This would take too long for his taste and he did not want to waste more chakra than he already had.

"Kisame, water!" he said, avoiding another attack.

Kisame kicked one of his opponents in the stomach and formed the seals, though he could not see much use for it. Earth Style was stronger than Water Style. From that point of view, he was at a disadvantage. Itachi's tactical acumen had never failed them before, however, so he did as he was told.

"\_Suiton:\_ \_Bakusui Shouha!" \_(A.N.: Water Style: Exploding Water Shock Wave)

The shinobi were caught in the onslaught of water coming their way, not having expected this type of attack. Itachi jumped to high ground and Kisame followed his lead as the waves crashed against the surrounding rocks.

"\_Raikiri!\_"

The moment Akane's lightning technique touched the water, everything was electrified in a massive blast. The force of it threw her back into the air. Itachi caught her before she hit the buzzing, steaming water, and jumped with her to safety. He lay her down on a rock and let her catch her breath.

"You have clearly overestimated my abilities," she said, still panting, dragging herself up against the wall of the rock. "What possessed you to even think I could manage more than one \_Raikiri\_?"

"I was right, though."

She opened her mouth to protest, but Kisame landed next to them and cut her off: "Itachi-san, your friend here looks a bit drained. Either you think too highly of her or you're trying to get rid of her. Has she already outlasted her usefulness?" He held out a waterproof container. "I plucked this off one of the casualties. It seems to be what we're looking for."

Itachi made no move to take it. "You are to deliver it to our client in Amegakure."

"What about you?"

"Akane and I will be taking a detour."

Kisame shrugged it off nonchalantly. "Eloping, eh?" he said, chuckling. "I should have seen it coming. I'll be waiting for you in Amegakure then. When you're done running around, maybe we can go after the four-tails."

Itachi nodded and Kisame took off. "We should go before the Konoha team arrives," he told Akane.

"I agree."

## 5. Nara Showdown

### \*\*Chapter 5 - Nara Showdown\*\*

They stopped at sundown. Itachi would have pressed on if Akane had not been exhausted from the earlier fight, but even so, they had

covered enough ground. The Konoha team would not stumble upon them on their way back from the rendezvous point. He lit a small fire to keep them warm, as they were near the mountains and nights could be chilly in these parts. Without Kisame, tonight felt reminiscent of his time with the ANBU.

He poked the fire and added more kindle to it. Akane was sitting on the ground, leaning against a tree, already wrapped up in a blanket. She had been reading from a book, but now her eyes had drifted away and she seemed lost in thought.

"Why did you leave Konoha?" Itachi asked, though he thought he knew the answer already.

She looked at him tiredly and it seemed to him that there was also a hint of sadness in her eyes. "How could I have stayed, knowing what they did to you?"

"I didn't do it for them," he said.

"They forced you to do it nonetheless."

Itachi sighed. Though part of him admired her resolve as his friend, he wished she would have stayed. Konoha needed its shinobi. On the other hand, Danzo would have eventually found out she knew the truth about the Uchiha massacre. She would have been in danger. He blamed himself for telling her the truth. It would have been enough to knock her unconscious that night, but there was only so much he could endure. He had had a moment of weakness. Despite all that, no matter how much he blamed himself for the path she had chosen, he realized he did not regret it.

When Itachi looked up, he saw that she had dozed off. Her book had fallen from her lap and it lay open in the grass. He reached out and picked it up, skimming through the pages she had been reading. It was an advanced medical journal written by Tsunade. If she had left Konoha shortly after him, she could not have taken the exam to become a medic-nin. Nevertheless, the journal was beyond the understanding of a novice, meaning that she had continued her studies. He closed the journal and placed it beside her.

He wondered where Sasuke was, if he was safe and resting. Safe was a relative term, of course, given that he was in Orochimaru's company, but Itachi had no doubt his brother was more than capable of defending himself from the snake if need be. By the time he would face his little brother, he may grow too weak. It was his greatest fear to run out of time before that happened. Perhaps he should not have postponed his search for Akane. Either way, it couldn't be helped now. He had no choice but to weather through it.

They set out at the crack of dawn and only slowed down as they neared the facility. It was Akane who lead the way this time. They took a break around noon to eat something and discuss the plan.

"There didn't use to be much security, given the remote location and how only Nara clan members know about it. I don't know how much has changed since then though," she said. "Especially since I'm a missing-nin. They might have taken measures to prevent me from accessing the facility."



They approached from the south-west and perched themselves on a branch with a good view of the entrance and the path leading up to it. Akane did not notice anything out of the ordinary and Itachi did not sense anyone nearby. She motioned for him to stay put and crept up to the entrance.

Akane felt like walking back into the past. She stood a few feet away from the door, biting her lip. There was no telling if they had changed anything about the security without attempting to open the door. She took a deep breath to calm herself and placed her hands to form the seals.

"\_Kagezeki no Jutsu!"\_ (A.N.: Shadow Barrier Jutsu, made up by me)

A black seal appeared on the door briefly before fading away. Akane unclasped her hands and walked up to the entrance now, frowning at the key pad. This was the tricky part. She typed the old sequence of numbers and changed the last few digits, which stood for the member's identity, then backed away. It took no more than a few moments before the two metal doors hissed open, but they felt like minutes to her.

"\_Kage-Kubishibari no Jutsu!"\_ (Shadow-Neck Binding Jutsu)

Akane took a step to the left, but the shadow immobilized her before she could jump out of its range. The hand-shaped shadow traveled up her body and settled around her neck, but did not squeeze.

"Hello, cousin. Long time no see."

"Shikamaru," she said. He had grown so much she had not recognized him until he had called her 'cousin'. She made no attempt to communicate with Itachi. He would know what to do. All she could do for now was stall.

"You're in tough luck," Shikamaru said. "Rikumaru died this spring. We changed the passcode."

"Don't tell me you've been too lazy to change it after I left."

Shikamaru smirked. "What are you doing here?"

"I-"

A rain of shuriken whirred past her and buried themselves into the ground between them, close enough to make Shikamaru jump back and break the jutsu. Akane did not waste the time Itachi had given her.

"\_Kagemane no Jutsu!" \_

As their shadows connected, Shikamaru's body was forced to mirror Akane's position. Her eyes drifted to his right leg, where a single shuriken had embedded itself. An extra security measure in case Shikamaru was expecting an attack and the feint would not cause him to lose focus.

"It seems I'm at a disadvantage," Shikamaru said, his eyes looking past Akane's shoulder.

She felt, rather than heard, Itachi approaching. "Please forgive me, Shikamaru-kun," she said. A moment later his eyes rolled into the back of his head and he collapsed as Akane stopped the jutsu. She knelt beside him, took out the shuriken embedded in his thigh and placed a palm over the wound to heal it.

"How long do you need?"

Akane wiped the sweat from her brow and stood up when she finished. "Not long, if he was alone up here. But he may have alerted my clan. If that's the case, it won't be long before they make an appearance. We should hurry."

They entered the facility and kept a close eye on the monitors linked to the surveillance cameras outside while Akane stormed through the medical storage unit.

"How far away from here is the first camera?" Itachi asked after he saw three figures darting through the branches on the monitor labeled #1.

Akane cursed under her breath while shoving some vials in her backpack. "We have to get out in two minutes." More vials clinked as she stuffed them inside on top of the others. "The monitors are purposely mislabeled to give a trespasser a sense of false security." She opened some drawers and closed them back with loud bangs and more curses.

"Time's up," Itachi said calmly.

She shrugged on the backpack and they rushed towards the exit. With a final glance at the still unconscious Shikamaru, Akane jumped into the trees after Itachi. They would have to go at top speed in order to avoid an altercation, if her clan members decided to pursue them. Akane smirked. She could almost hear her uncle complain about how troublesome women are.

They stopped near the border and by that time, even Itachi seemed to have a hard time keeping up the pace. Akane collapsed at the base of a tree and gulped down some water before taking out her spoils for a proper assessment of their usefulness.

"I have the most important ones," she told Itachi after a while, placing them carefully back inside her backpack.

"Who was Rikumarū?"

Akane smiled. "One of our deer. Antlers like his are a key ingredient in a variety of our medicines. The passcode was his date of birth." She paused to take a bite from a ration bar. "I'll mix up your medicine as soon as we reach some place where I can properly wash my hands. Until then, I'll see what other damage I can heal."

She poured her remaining water on her hands and walked up to him, kneeling beside. The red of the sharingan faded to black without her asking for it this time, she was pleased to remark. He felt his muscles tense under her touch, but the soothing warmth of her chakra soon coaxed them into relaxing.

Itachi allowed himself to close his eyes for a moment as the pain, which had been mounting back to its usual intensity, began ebbing away and the last of his energy along with it. Akane watched as his head fell to the side and the rhythm of his breath slowed down. Sadness bloomed in her chest like a drop of ink in water. She allowed the tears she had been holding back for days to roll down her cheeks.

A few more weeks were all she could give him.

## 6. To Love and Let Go

### \*\*Chapter 6 - To Love and Let Go\*\*

Clouds were gathering in the sky. The wind carried the scent of rain. Itachi stood alone on the edge of the cliff, waiting. Thunder rumbled low. He heard Kisame approaching and a dull thud as he dropped the limp form of a red-haired man. The Four-Tails' Jinchuuriki. It was done, then.

"You're back."

"Yeah," Kisame said, "but having to bring him back without killing him was quite a bother."

The first cold drops of rain pattered on the ground, but the earth was quick to suck them up. It quickly turned into a downpour, however.

"Let's take cover under a tree, or we'll catch a cold."

A cold was the least of Itachi's worries. "The Leader is waiting for word that we've captured him."

"So we make him wait a little," Kisame said. "Once the sealing begins, we'll be working for quite some time." He picked up the Jinchuuriki using Samehada. "Good thing we left the kunoichi back at the hideout. This would have been very dull for her."

Itachi looked at the unconscious man hanging over Samehada. "He seems near death. You should handle the elderly with care."

Kisame scoffed. "You say that because you don't know him. This Jinchuuriki who uses the Corrosion Style of the Four Tails isn't what you think. You didn't fight the geezer yourself, so you wouldn't understand what I went through. On the other hand, I was the one who asked to go alone. Say, want me to beat your assignment half-dead too?"

It was not going to get to that, Itachi thought, but could not tell Kisame that. "Don't get too excited, Kisame."

"Well, I'm a bit tired, you see. I wish we could catch all the tailed beasts already."

"Don't be so impatient. It's going to take some time."

They walked away from the cliff and headed for cover under the trees nearby. Itachi sat at the base of an old oak tree.

"I wonder about that," Kisame said, dropping his captive unceremoniously. "There's just a few more, right? And it's been decided that the Nine Tails will be sealed last. That's what the Leader said. After all, all the Jinchuuriki need to be captured alive. So I say just catch them quickly and leave them tied up."

Itachi smiled, despite himself. "Fine by me, but remember that Deidara failed. If he's going to be sealed last, it's no big deal if we capture him last. And besides, Akatsuki is becoming too conspicuous lately. If we capture the Nine Tails too soon, Konoha will become even more of a nuisance than it already is."

"Heh! You really think so?"

"Konohagakure has very strong links with other villages. If they begin to collaborate, it will be difficult for us to act. It will be wiser to collect up to the Eight Tails with as little commotion as possible."

"I see. I guess you're right."

At that moment, the two of them both felt the Leader's summons. It seemed they would not get the respite they were hoping for.

"We've been caught dawdling," Kisame said.

\* \* \*

><p>Akane had been alone at one of the Akatsuki hideouts for almost a week by the time Itachi and Kisame returned. She did not come out to greet them when they splashed out of the water tunnel that served as a secret entrance into the base.<p>

"It seems your kunoichi is upset we've left her alone for so long," Kisame remarked with a grin. Even he sounded weary, which was unusual, given the insane amounts of chakra the Kiri-nin had. Perhaps capturing the Four-Tails alone had taken more of a toll on him than he wanted Itachi to believe. "Well, I'm going to take a nap. If anyone bothers me, I'll make fish food out of them," he said, dragging Samehada rather than carrying it on his shoulder. "You should get some rest too, Itachi. You look like you've been through Hell and back."

Itachi walked along the dark corridor into one of the back rooms. Akane's chakra flow was sluggish, indicating that she was most likely asleep. He pushed the door open carefully. The candle flames flickered from the sudden draft and light danced on the walls. He stepped inside and shut the door behind him. The room, which had been empty when he left, was now a mess of scattered books and vials. Akane was indeed sleeping.

He gave a sigh, thinking for some reason of how easy it would be to kill her right now, and calculated a trajectory towards the bathroom before zigzagging through the mess without a sound. Once inside, he let the Akatsuki cloak slip off his shoulders. He thought of how heavy it had started to feel on his body lately. Looking in the mirror for the first time in weeks, he realized just how much weight he had lost. He was growing weaker every day, despite all of Akane's

efforts. At least the medicine kept the pain at bay.

He stepped into the shower. All his preparations were nearly done. Soon, he would be giving Sasuke what he wanted. The hot water eased the soreness in his muscles. He stayed under the jet until sleep threatened to overcome him forcefully if he did not lay down. With his last tidbits of strength, he donned a change of clothes and walked back into the room.

Akane stirred when he lay down next to her, but she did not wake up. Itachi turned on his side, facing away from her, and closed his eyes, waiting to slip into oblivion for a while. He felt her move again, then the warmth of her body radiating on his back. He thought about how much time she had spent racking her brains over his illness during the past few weeks. She owed him nothing and yet here she was, struggling to keep him alive and functional, even though she knew his purpose.

Itachi turned around and lay facing her. He realized now how much that night had changed her life. Had he not told her the truth, she would have been in Konoha with her family now. She would have friends. A lover. She would have become a medic-nin and saved lives on the battlefield. And here she was, fighting to keep him alive so that he would let himself be killed. He had considered Shisui to have been his only friend. He had been wrong.

His hand reached out for her face. His fingers went through her hair and settled on the side of her head, hesitating. Akane opened her eyes and looked at him, making no move to discourage him. Itachi pulled her closer and pressed his lips against hers. Her arms encircled him and he did not flinch this time. He was running out of time, but somehow time seemed to stop in her embrace.

\* \* \*

><p>Itachi stayed still as Akane's healing chakra entered his system for the last time. She said nothing as she flushed strength into his weakened body, furrowing her brows in concentration. They were alone in the vast meeting hall within the old Uchiha hideout. Sasuke would be arriving any moment now and Itachi had left Kisame with instructions to let no one but his little brother pass.<p>

"Have you ever thought about telling Sasuke the truth?" she asked as the green, healing chakra faded from her pale hands. Her voice echoed in the vast space.

"This is exactly how I wanted it to be. I want all of his hatred aimed at me, not at Konoha. Speaking of thatâ€¦" he said, slowly rising from his place and taking out a scroll from inside his cloak. "I want you to deliver this to the village."

Akane frowned as she took the scroll. "What is this?"

Itachi smiled. "My last report on the Akatsuki organization's plans."

Her grip around the scroll tightened slightly and she could not keep the surprise from showing on her face. For a moment he thought she would refuse, but she gave in and packed away the scroll along with her other belongings. Itachi straightened himself up.

"Thank you," he said. "For everything." He held out his hand. Akane looked at it, visibly pained by the memory it stirred. She almost stepped back, but she knew this would be for the last time. She grabbed hold of it and Itachi pulled her in his arms. "Forget what they did to me," he told her. "Don't live your life in the shadow of what happened that night."

Akane forced herself to let go. They both stepped back, regarding each other for a moment. Then Itachi bowed formally, smiling. Akane returned his bow and turned away quickly, not wanting him to see the tears that threatened to spill on her cheeks.

\* \* \*

><p>It started to rain. She had watched from afar for hours and now it was over. The Uchiha hideout, ravaged by the battle between the Uchiha brothers, had fallen silent. Akane walked towards the two men lying beside each other. She looked at an unconscious Sasuke, watched as the rain washed Itachi's blood from his forehead. She bent over the young Uchiha and assessed the damage. He would never have won this battle if Itachi had not been ill, she thought bitterly, stabilizing his condition with healing chakra.<p>

Then she turned her gaze to Itachi. She thought she had cried her heart out while they fought, and although her heart felt cold, her eyes still filled with tears at the sight of the smile on his lips.

She took off her backpack and pulled out her old headband from one of the pockets. She had not worn it since leaving Konoha. Cradling Itachi's head carefully, Akane untied his headband and replaced it with hers. \_Your true colors for the whole world to see.\_

As she walked away, Akane put on Itachi's headband and smiled.

## 7. Epilogue

**\*\*Epilogue\*\***

The Ten-Tails' howl made the ground shake as if to rid itself of such horror. Hiruzen himself found himself staring in awe of the diabolical creature the Akatsuki had unleashed. Its tails swooshed through the air, lashing in every direction and cutting through the shinobi lines.

He saw the Nara clan assemble to restrain it near the frontline, enacting Shikaku's last plan. A figure darted past him as he watched. It struck him as odd that the \_kunoichi\_ was not wearing the Allied Forces' attire, but he caught glimpse of the tattoo on the back of her neck and understood. A smile appeared on his lips.

Shikamaru looked at the other Nara clan members, who nodded one by one. Everyone was ready. It was now or never.

"\_Kage Nui no Jutsu!\_" (Shadow Sewing Jutsu)

The great lumbering beast howled as thousands of needles trapped its shadow, but the force of its struggle nearly pulled the Nara clan

members along with it. They had managed to restrain it, but they wouldn't be able to hold it for long like this.

The attack signal was given. The creature thrashed under the onslaught as Shikamaru and the others fought to keep it still. It was slowly moving out of range. They would soon lose their control over it.

"\_Kagebunshin no Jutsu!"\_

Shikamaru turned his head at the sound of that voice.

"\_Kuro Higanbana!" \_

Tendrils of shadow sped forward from Akane's twelve shadow clones, attaching themselves to the Ten Tails' shadow. The beast slowly slid closer to the Nara shinobi. With the distance between them reduced, their control over it gained in strength.

Hiruzen watched Akane from afar as he paused between attacks.

"I see Itachi's Will of Fire in you, Akane," he said to himself and smiled once more.

End  
file.